

## **Idaho Panhandle Avalanche Center Avalanche Advisory**

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Happy Holidays! This is John “Oly” Olson with the Idaho Panhandle National Forest Avalanche Center. This advisory is valid for today, December 24th, 2009. This report does not apply to local ski areas within the forecast region and will remain in effect through midnight, Christmas, December 25<sup>th</sup>. The outlook through the weekend should be the same if the weather man is correct in his forecast. Special thanks to Idaho Parks and Recreation for sponsoring this morning’s avalanche advisory. Thanks to Jesse Salisbury and the Crew at Schweitzer Mountain Ski Patrol with their observations and support.

### **WEATHER**

The National Weather Service out of Spokane has posted an air stagnation advisory through at least next Tuesday. What that means is that the valleys will be shrouded in fog, low clouds and increasing pollution. The mountains, however, may be above the fog and in brilliant sunshine as Eric and I found today on our ski tour snow pack investigations from the top of Schweitzer Mountain Resort. The clouds below looked like a big sea with the higher peaks sticking out like islands in the ocean. What does this mean for the snow pack? Remember how surface hoar, the cornflakes of the snow pack, build during this cold clear weather condition. Well, you guessed it; we are having great skiing now on this weak layer on about 8” of light fluffy powder. The Last storm went out perfect for ski conditions—wet heavy snow turning to light dry fluff with no wind. Stellar conditions for snow sports. **Avalanche conditions will remain for the outlook period.**

**Avalanche conditions for the entire Idaho Panhandle National Forest Advisory Area are rated as MODERATE on slopes less than 35 degrees and above 5,000 feet.**

Natural avalanches are unlikely, human triggered avalanches are possible.

### Snowpack

In the Selkirk’s Eric and I found a significant weak layer midpack at a pronounced layer of surface hoar. On a 35 degree slope the weak layer failed when the block was isolated or with very light stress applied. The surface snow is very consistent on all aspects as the storm worked its magic. It’s as if the heavy wet layer about a foot down bridged the weak layers from last week and the new snow made the surface into true powder skiing conditions. Within the pack the conditions are developing more faceting snow layers. The pack is weak around a surface hoar layer below an ice layer about 18” below the surface. There is another weak layer on the ground. Right now this layer is decreasing to equal temperature round snow the lower you travel in elevation. I am afraid that there will be deep pack instability for some time at higher elevations. There is good bridging now over these weak layers but the right weather or load could trigger them.

Carole and Dan found similar conditions in the St. Regis Basin with all the signs of instability but there just isn't the load to trigger these sensitive layers YET!!! We'll see what the weather brings us.

#### Terrain

Not a lot of snow out there yet so the shrubbery and logs and rocks are still poking out of the snow off trail making it difficult to get around in all but the highest elevations. The rains of last week were snow (mostly) above 4500'. Travelling out of the valleys remains difficult with early season hazards diminishing as you gain elevation. There is about 5' of snow at Schweitzer Snotel and 3' at Lookout Pass. Spatial variability is the watch word with our current snow pack. Wind transported snow could make wind loaded slopes more hazardous. Be aware of shallow snowpack and stay away from rocky outcroppings that can be very weak.

If you are out and about in the mountains, which I know you will be, and you see avalanche activity or you have some pit information, please send us an email so we can include it in the advisory.

If you're at Schweitzer Mountain this week and have your avalanche gear take advantage of the free avalanche beacon training at 10AM on Sunday at the Clock Tower. Schweitzer Patrol will help you hone your skills with a 1 hour free training. After that, hit the beacon park at the top of the Basin Express, compliments of the Selkirk Powder Company, they sponsor a great resource for avalanche education and weather observations at <http://www.selkirkpowderco.com/>.

The State of Idaho Parks and Recreation Department in cooperation with the IPNF-AC, is conducting (**Free**) avalanche workshops for snowmobilers this winter in Coeur d' Alene on January 8 and 9, Sandpoint February 12-13, and in Priest Lake March 5-6. For more information go to the Idaho Parks and Recreation Department website at [www.parksandrecreation.idaho.gov](http://www.parksandrecreation.idaho.gov), or call Marc Hildesheim, North Region Trails Specialist, at (208) 769-1511.

The Panhandle Avalanche Center in Sandpoint and Sandpoint Parks and Recreation is sponsoring free avalanche workshops for all snowgoers. "Decision Making in the Backcountry" workshops will be offered 1/6/10 and 2/10/10. These are offered at the old Federal Building in Sandpoint and are **Free to the public**. For class schedules in the Silver Valley contact Dan Frigard at 752-5130. In Avery contact Ed Odegaard at 245-6209.

If you have a group or club that is interested in more education on avalanche safety we will be available for free avalanche awareness classes beginning in December, so feel free to give us a call. As usual we would appreciate hearing from anyone who happens to observe any recent avalanche activity while out in the backcountry or just wants to let us know what is going on in their area. You can reach Kevin Davis in Sandpoint by calling (208) 265-6686 and Ed Odegaard in Avery by calling (208) 245-6209.

Avalanche conditions change for better or worse continually. Backcountry travelers should be prepared to assess current conditions for themselves, plan their routes of travel accordingly, and never travel alone. Backcountry travelers can reduce their exposure to avalanche hazards by utilizing timbered trails and ridge routes and by avoiding open and exposed terrain with slope angles of 30 degrees or more. Backcountry travelers should carry the necessary avalanche rescue equipment such as a shovel, avalanche probe or probe ski poles, a rescue beacon and a well-equipped first aid kit.

Have a Merry Christmas and a safe and pleasant weekend.